

Travel

St. Tropez on the Seine

BY HERBERT R. LOTTMAN

The worst sometimes happens. For the past couple of summers I have been fretting over the growing army of strollers in tourist undress and the proliferation of temporary art galleries among studiously picturesque restaurants in what is usually the sleepy little Normandy port of Honfleur. I have winced when well-meaning friends exclaimed that the town was beginning to swing. In a monthly magazine aimed at French *bons vivants* the trendy travel writers of the Julliard guides have called Honfleur "the St. Tropez of variable weather": "Go there now," they urge. "Perhaps you'll live its final moments of peace." What they don't say is that their appalling prognosis is likely to hasten the day when Honfleur becomes just another overcrowded and overpriced sea-side resort.

Honfleur has been sleeping for nearly four centuries. Even the Allied landings in 1944 and the subsequent campaign, which destroyed so many old Norman towns, passed over this little one. It survived, along with its souvenirs of the great age of maritime exploration. Champlain sailed from Honfleur to found Quebec. Much later Charles Baudelaire settled here for a while—he thought it was going to be forever—and the harbor scenes that inspired his poem "Le Voyage" are the same ones that we stroll through today. Flaubert's characters also walked these streets. The artist Eugène Boudin was born in Honfleur, and there he learned how to paint clouds over the estuary.

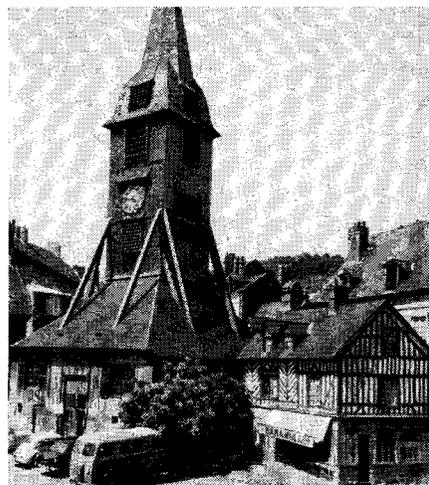
He was joined in his researches by a young man from across the mouth of the Seine at Le Havre, Claude Monet, and by Johann Jongkind from the Netherlands. (Some minor work of the pre-Impressionists is on view in a small Honfleur museum, and affluent tourists can stay overnight in the *auberge* that sheltered these young men who invented Impressionistic painting.)

Today Honfleur has a bare 9,000 inhabitants—by reputation a parochial and inhospitable lot—and when the tourists arrive they must compete for a grand total of 220 rooms in twenty hotels; only half a dozen can be recom-

mended. The overflow is dispatched to Deauville, Trouville, and other mundane places. (St. Tropez, with only two-thirds the population of Honfleur, provides 1,200 rooms and manages to accommodate 50,000 tourists during the season.)

The point is that Honfleur hasn't been, until now, a tourist target. Unlike St. Tropez, it has always been a workingman's town, a port for wood, coal, and grains. There is as much life in winter as in summer. Fishing boats sail in and out of the old harbor when the extreme tides allow, and the beach is uninviting. I discovered Honfleur on a drizzly autumn weekend years ago when the grim seaside resort towns were shut down. Honfleur sparkled, and I did not see it in July and August until I bought a farm nearby. Like St. Tropez, Honfleur has some cafés on the waterside, a couple of out- and indoor restaurants, such as the attractive *Auberge de la Lieutenance*, and even a fashion shop or two featuring international labels. I like to think that the resemblance ends there.

Scenically, Honfleur is an easy enough mark for amateur painters. The old houses built on the site of medieval fortifications are protected from rain by slate shingles running down the facades. Sculpted beams on half-timbered buildings remind you of the decorations on sailing vessels. Headquarters of the King's intendant in earlier times, the *Lieutenance* is a remnant of the sixteenth century, embodying parts of the original fortifications from the Middle Ages—when Honfleur protect-



Steps inside St. Catherine's Belfry lead to a display of fine, old timberwork.

ed the south bank of the Seine from the English.

Around the corner and up the hill, the Place St. Catherine is Honfleur's other most reproduced site. The large wooden church is a phenomenon, even for France. It was constructed by local shipbuilders in a period of feverish reconstruction after the Hundred Years' War, and its vaulted ceilings resemble nothing so much as reversed hulls of ships. On Saturday mornings a busy outdoor market attracts farmers from miles around, carting familiar cheeses such as Camembert and Pont-l'Évêque, in addition to a locally produced, unpasteurized, and often exquisite Pavé. But the pride of the region is the apple in all its forms, including cider and apple brandy (which takes the name of the *département*, Calvados, and gives back more than it takes).

It's obvious that I prefer Honfleur the way it is now. The people there vote against progress, art festivals, and great societies; they have helped to make it the kind of place to which writers and artists are drawn. But, with the Autoroute de Normandie under construction (and creeping closer to the channel ports every day), Honfleur is only about two hours from Paris. There used to be a train, but now a bus—not very reliable—meets trains from Lisieux or Pont-l'Évêque. Recently the French installed what they delicately call semiautomatic telephone service between Paris and Honfleur, which virtually succeeds in cutting off the latter from the former. I sometimes feel grateful for this isolation, just as I do for the cantankerous newsdealer who despises those who buy foreign papers (even from him), or for the shopkeepers who frown at unfamiliar faces (even if they belong to new customers).

No, it's not at all certain that fashion can change Honfleur, at least not during the off-season when the chic bad restaurants stand empty, and warm rooms in decent inns are still hard to find. The excellent *Hostellerie Lechat*, opposite the wooden church, won't grow any bigger. The farmhouse feeling of the *Ferme de la Grande Cour* won't change, nor is time likely to shake up the little hotels with three-dollar rooms such as my old *Les Cascades*.

Perhaps the swingers will abandon Honfleur for the very same reasons Baudelaire did. Girls and drugs are hard to come by up there. □

Films

Black Can Be Beautiful

BY ARTHUR KNIGHT

Trust the moviemakers to go where the money is. A few years ago you couldn't give away a black-oriented movie, no matter how well intended, no matter how well done, unless it happened to have Sidney Poitier in it—and then its audience was apt to be predominantly white, liberal, and middle-class. Last year, however, witnessed an unanticipated breakthrough. The multifaceted Melvin Van Peebles produced, directed, and starred in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, and it raked in millions. Then Richard Roundtree appeared in *Shaft* as a black version of Bogart's private eye, and the same thing happened. What made the studio executives pay startled attention was the fact that most of the money was rolling in from the black communities across the nation. There really was a black audience.

It generally takes about a year to put a picture together. So the full impact of that discovery is only now becoming visible on our screens. The numbers alone are impressive, even if the pictures themselves are somewhat less so. This morning's paper lists a good half-dozen playing simultaneously—or maybe not such a good half-dozen, since most of them are caper films cut from the same swatch as *Shaft*, *Sweet Sweetback*, and *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. Indeed, two of them, *Shaft's Big Score* and *Come Back, Charleston Blue*, are simply reprises of earlier successes, featuring the same characters. The formula is disconcertingly simple. Instead of white private eyes, we now get black private eyes (or, occasionally, cops)—men of tremendous muscular coordination, enormous sexual prowess, and an unquenchable enthusiasm for putting down Whitey. And whatever the title, each remains essentially the same picture.

In *Slaughter*, for example, former football star Jim Brown plays an ex-Green Beret officer whose family has been wiped out by the Syndicate (the polite movie word for the Mafia). Bent on revenge, he is recruited by a federal agency that is working on the

same case. Both the federal agent (Cameron Mitchell) and the head of the Syndicate (Rip Torn) are forthright bigots, thus affording big Jim ample opportunity to talk back. After the inevitable car chase (accompanied by the equally inevitable electric-organ music), Brown tosses a flaming cigarette lighter into the gas tank of the gang chief's car and watches implacably as he burns to death. One can readily understand the glee in the black communities at this kind of representation of black supremacy.

Consider the more complex case of *Bone*, which is virtually a catalogue of all the fears and fantasies that middle-class whites have ever held about blacks. In it, a strapping black (Yaphet Kotto) turns up suddenly one morning beside a Beverly Hills swimming pool and demands of its white owner, in effect, your money or your wife. Andrew Duggan, playing a debt-ridden used-car dealer, on his way to the bank has second thoughts about the matter. The would-be rapist has second thoughts as well when the wife (Jo Van Fleet) becomes too compliant—so much so that *she* has to seduce *him*. And she apparently likes it so well that the two of them plot to do away with the husband. Writer-director Larry Cohen has explained that everything takes place on a fantasy level, that each of the characters is actually the projection of someone

else's image of that character. Perhaps so, but I find myself wondering how many audiences are sophisticated enough to view as fantasy a picture that seems to be unfolding on the level of melodrama, and wondering what the reaction of the blacks will be as intended rape turns into seduction.

On the other hand, there was a film unveiled at the recent Atlanta Film Festival that is shortly to go into general release and that I can only hope will find wide acceptance in black and white communities.

Sounder makes no attempt to pit race against race or to exploit the real grievances that blacks can hold against whites. Not that the film blinks them away or pretends that they don't exist. Intolerance and discrimination are very real, and they were even more intense in Louisiana in 1933, the time of this story (adapted by black playwright Lonne Elder III from the Newbery Award novel by William H. Armstrong). But in *Sounder* they are presented as facts of life, as part of that remarkable growth process in humans—all humans—that produces greatness regardless of color or creed.

Sounder's plot is not unfamiliar. A share-cropping family, hungry and destitute, is further bereft when the father is hauled off to a chain gang for having stolen a little meat for the table.



Paul Winfield (left) and Cicely Tyson (wearing hat) give moving performances in *Sounder*, a black film for all races.